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## TWO ANCIENT MEXICAN ATLATLS

By D. I. BUSHNELL, JR.

About three years ago there came to light in Florence, Italy, two Mexican atlatls, true gems of ancient Aztec art. They were fortunately obtained by Professor Mantegazza and are now preserved in the Museo Nazionale d'Antropologia ed Etnologia del R. Istituto di Studi Superiori, in Florence.

The specimens are probably the finest existing examples of the throwing-sticks of the ancient Mexicans. From the high degree of skill shown in the design and execution of the carving, it is evident they were ceremonial or sacred objects and not intended for actual use. Moreover, the carved surfaces of both specimens were originally covered with a thin layer of yellow gold, the greater portion of which still adheres, although on the higher, more exposed parts of the relief, it has been rubbed or worn away. The wood of which they are made is very heavy, fine-grained, and of reddish black hue.

In the following brief description I shall refer to the specimens as *A* and *B*.

Specimen *A* (plate xxi) is the larger of the two, the dimensions being :

Length.....	605 mm.
Width { at upper end .....	37 mm.
at end of carving .....	30 mm.
at lower end.....	22 mm.
Length of carved surface.....	355 mm.
Length of hook.....	65 mm.
Length of groove .....	540 mm.
Width of groove { at base of hook .....	7 mm.
at lower end .....	5 mm.

The decoration on the back of this specimen represents human figures and various symbols carved in low relief, but distinct and sharp in outline. As will be seen by referring to the illustration,



Back

Carved surface, back, full size.

Front.

ANCIENT MEXICAN ATLATL (SPECIMEN A)

the decoration is rather uniform and well balanced; the larger and more prominent figures extend down the median line, while the lesser are placed on either side. In this respect it differs essentially from the other specimen, as a comparison of the plates will show.

On the front a narrow line of carving extends along each side of the groove, beginning at the upper end and terminating at a point opposite the end of the carved surface on the back. The groove and hook are without decoration, but are covered with a layer of gold.

Specimen *B* (plate xxii) is the shorter of the two and is the finest example of the ancient Mexican atlatl or spear-thrower known to exist. Its dimensions are:

Length .....	575 mm.
Width { at upper end .....	35 mm.
at end of carving .....	27 mm.
at lower end .....	25 mm.
Length of carved surface.....	378 mm.
Length of hook .....	55 mm.
Length of grooves .....	520 mm.
Width of grooves { at base of hook.....	10 mm.
at lower end .....	6 mm.

The peculiarity of this unique specimen is that it has two grooves on the front surface, instead of the single groove, extending from the hooks to the lower end. If this atlatl was ever actually used, which appears to be doubtful, it was evidently intended to



FIG. 13.—Sections of the two atlatls at the ends of the carved surfaces. (Exact size.)

hurl two arrows or spears simultaneously, thus increasing its effectiveness as a weapon.

The complicated decoration on the back, in which are introduced representations of human figures, various symbols, and animal

designs, is carved in high, bold relief, extending from 3 mm. to 5 mm. above the surface or background, on which is represented a symbolic design in very low relief, the whole being covered with gold. The carving on the back is divided by two transverse ridges into three distinct sections of unequal size. In each of the end sections are represented two human figures facing inward. In the central section, which includes about four-fifths of the entire carved surface, the decoration is more intricate and confused, and will require one well versed in Aztec lore to decipher the various figures and symbols portrayed.

The front of this atlatl, as above stated, has two grooves, thus constituting a new type, of which this is the only known specimen. The three ridges between which extend the two grooves are of equal size, being about 3 mm. high and 4 mm. wide at the bottom. The bottoms of the grooves are flat and are decorated with a simple design of incised lines. The decoration begins at the ends of the hooks and extends as far as the end of the carved surface on the back. The designs in the two grooves are different. The hooks at the upper end of the grooves are carved in low relief, a human figure, standing and facing inward, being represented on each.

It is to be regretted that the history of these two most interesting objects is not known, but it is evident they have been in Florence for several centuries. They probably belonged to the collection sent by Cortés to Charles V of Spain and by him presented to Pope Clement VII, himself a Medici.

The atlatl in the Kircheriana Museum in Rome<sup>1</sup> is similar to the Florence specimens, being richly carved and covered with gold. Possibly the three belonged at one time to the same collection. The Italian museums are certainly fortunate in possessing the three most valuable and interesting examples of the ancient Mexican spear-thrower known to exist.

<sup>1</sup> This specimen was described, but not figured, by Mrs Zelia Nuttall in her paper "The Atlatl or Spear-thrower" published in 1891 by the Peabody Museum as No. 3 of Vol. 1 of its *Archaeological and Ethnological Papers*. The dimensions of this specimen, according to Mrs Nuttall, which I quote for comparison, are: Length, 558 mm. ; width of upper end, 37 mm. ; of lower end, 19 mm.



Back.



Carved surface, back, full size.



Front.

ANCIENT MEXICAN ATLATL (SPECIMEN B)

A specimen in the British Museum<sup>1</sup> is decorated with carving covered with gold on the back only, the front being entirely plain. In one respect, however, this is the most perfect of the four ; the finger-loops still remain bound on near the lower end. But there is nothing to indicate that similar loops were originally attached to the three specimens in the Italian museums.

The atlatl in Berlin belongs to a type different from those to which I have referred.

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<sup>1</sup> The late Dr Hjalmar Stolpe described and figured this specimen in colors in *Internationales Archives für Ethnographie*, vol. III, 1890, p. 234. The length of the specimen is given as 506 mm. ; width of upper end, 33 mm. ; of the lower end, 23 mm.

FLORENCE, ITALY,  
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